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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: FISCALIA INVESTIGATES TAOIST COMMUNITY IN
SANTANDER DEPARTMENT

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: On November 25, officials from the Office of the Prosecutor General ("Fiscalia") raided a Taoist commune located in a remote region of Santander Department to investigate allegations that the commune's leadership was involved in opium production and kidnapping. The allegations were raised by eight former commune members, four of whom have been murdered in recent months. Authorities entered the commune with arrest warrants for twelve commune members and are investigating possible involvement of commune leaders in the murders of the four informants. Commune leaders have denied any wrongdoing and allege the raid was part of a larger GOC plot to close down the commune. International Red Cross (ICRC) representatives departed the scene on November 29 after determining no violation of international humanitarian law had been committed. Although commune leaders say many residents are foreigners, post has been unable to verify whether any U.S. citizens are present. End Summary.

12. (U) On November 25, a team of Fiscalia prosecutors and judicial investigators -- accompanied by approximately 400 personnel from the Colombian National Police (CNP), Colombian Army (COLAR), Department of Administrative Security (DAS), and Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF) -- raided the Templo Vegetal Sakroakuarius, a Taoist commune located in rural Taladro municipality, Santander Department. The raid was based on information provided by eight former commune members alleging the commune's leadership was engaged in illegal activities, including opium production and kidnapping. Some informants alleged the commune holds some residents there against their will. According to media reports, four of the eight informants have been murdered by hitmen in the past three months. The remaining four have been placed in the Fiscalia's witness protection program.

13. (U) Prosecutors entered the commune compound, located in a remote, mountainous area, with arrest warrants for twelve commune members charged with possession of illegal arms and kidnapping. (None of the twelve were present when the prosecutors arrived.) Two of the informants -- wearing hoods to protect their identities -- accompanied prosecutors. According to media reports, the Fiscalia confiscated four grenades, ten radios, vehicles with foreign license plates, and three motorcycles. In a press interview, General Hipolito Herrera told reporters the police are investigating whether the commune's leadership ordered the murders of the four informants. Post has not yet been able to confirm this information with the Fiscalia. The commune's leadership has repeatedly denied any involvement in kidnapping, narcotics trafficking, or other illegal activities.

14. (C) The commune's leadership claims the Fiscalia's raid is part of a larger plot designed to close down the commune and has alleged that COLAR personnel have forced more than 200 families to evacuate the compound. The community's isolation in a region with a significant guerrilla presence makes it difficult to gather accurate information. However, ICRC representatives told us their personnel departed the area on November 29 after determining the incident was out of ICRC's jurisdiction because no violation of international humanitarian law had been committed. The number of commune residents is unknown. According to an urgent action e-mail issued by commune leaders, the commune's members are citizens of Colombia, the United States, and a number of Western European and Latin American countries. Although ICRC verified the presence of British and Salvadoran citizens, post has been unable to confirm whether any U.S. citizens are residents of the commune.

WOOD